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How to Choose and Take an Online Course

So, you've been asked to take an online course. What next? If you have never taken an online course, choosing one or knowing what to expect can be difficult, but a few simple pointers can help you pick the best course for you.

Choosing an online course

What are your learning preferences?

The first step in narrowing down your options is to determine your favorite learning methods. Even though most courses try to accommodate as many learning styles as possible, some courses will suit you better than others. Here are some questions to help you determine your learning preferences:

- Do you learn well by reading?
- Do you prefer listening to an explanation or viewing a demonstration?
- Do you like extensive feedback in order to master new skills, or do you prefer to experiment on your own?
- Do you like having the flexibility to jump between topics or do you prefer a directed course structure?
- Do you like having a variety of assessment methods?

Lguide.com's extensive library of course reviews can help you understand the learning styles the courses are targeting and assist you in making an informed courseware decision.

Choose courses you can use today.

Clearly, you'll get a better return on your time by taking a course that's relevant to your work. But your ability to retain what you learn will also be improved if you choose a course you can use immediately. Adult learners remember things best when they practice them right away.

Do you want a just-in-time course, or a comprehensive one?

Most online courses are either comprehensive courses or just-in-time courses. Just-in-time courses are usually brief, and they focus on immediately usable knowledge and skills. They may not provide exhaustive background on the subject, but they give you the high points and let you get back to work. In contrast, comprehensive courses present a broad range of information using a top to bottom, organized format. They're usually a few hours long, and they also usually give you a way to skip any material you already know. Which one you choose will depend on what kind of knowledge you need.

Take online demos to see what publishers are like.

Another helpful way to narrow down your options is to visit the publishers' Web sites. Usually they offer free demos, which will allow you to get an idea of how different publishers' courses are presented and structured.

Taking an online course

Now that you are ready to begin, you need a quick review of what to expect from an online course. Here are some questions you might be asking yourself:

- What are the components of an online course?
- What do I need to know about computers to take an online course?
- How do I navigate a course correctly?
- How will taking an online course be different than a traditional instructor-led class?
- How will I apply my knowledge in the workplace?

What are the basic elements of an online course?

- A main menu, which lists the course's general topics and chapter sub-topics
- Quizzes, assessments, and exercises that help you apply and evaluate your knowledge

- Visual graphics that supplement the material
- Introductions containing topic objectives and chapter summaries
- Additional resources, including glossaries, related links, and chat rooms

What do I need to know about computers to take an online course?

Don't worry--you don't have to be a computer guru to take an online course. You just have to be comfortable using a browser. The majority of courses are easy to navigate and offer help options if you get confused.

How do I navigate an online course?

Here are the basic navigational features you can expect in an online course:

- Forward and back buttons to maneuver between chapters
- A help/navigate button which offers navigational advice if you get stuck
- An exit option that allows you to leave the course
- A bookmark option that will mark your place in the course
- A sound card option where you can choose to hear an audio narration

How is an online course different from a traditional instructor-led class?

Online courses are more similar to traditional courses than you might think. However, some important differences exist.

Similarities:

- Online courses offer a syllabus or main menu outlining the course contents.
- Quizzes, tests, worksheets, and exercises are used to let you practice and evaluate your performance.
- Online instructors or mentors are often available to provide live feedback.
- Chat rooms often allow for student interaction and topic discussions.

Differences:

- There is no live instructor keeping you on task.
- You must be self-motivated to complete the work.
- Courses take place asynchronously, meaning students are taking the course and responding to the material from multiple locations, at different times.
- Online courses do not provide the same level of interaction as classroom settings.

How will I apply what I have learned in the workplace?

The best way to retain information is to put your new skills to work immediately. If you pick a course you can use right away, it's a win-win situation: you get practice in what you've learned, and you can improve your work performance immediately. Also remember to take advantage of the resources the courses have to offer. Most courses give you some printable "take-aways" such as worksheets and study guides. Also refresh your skills by visiting the chat rooms, emailing your mentor with a question, or posting a question on the discussion board. Most courses give you access for a year, so you can revisit the course and refresh your knowledge at any time.

Our last bit of advice: talk to your colleagues about their online learning experiences. They can tell you what courses they have enjoyed and why. Their insights can help point you toward effective, informative courses. Good luck!